



JEFF SOMERS COLLECTIONS

a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 28

by Jeff Somers

28.

Officer Carol Beering was thirty-six, divorced, lived in Queens with her three children, and had a father dying terribly slowly in a private hospital that bled her dry. She was six weeks behind on her payments and the terror in her face every time I mentioned her kids was wonderful. I made a call and asked for her, had a thirty-second conversation with her, and then Rachel and I were standing outside The Bernard B. Kerik Complex on White Street, trying to look like cops.

I was wearing sunglasses at night like a fucking asshole, and found it was kind of fun. Being an asshole. Being an asshole was also pretty much the sum total of my Cop Costume.

Officer Beering emerged from the front doors with wide, terrified eyes, seeing me and crossing over to us, looking in every direction as she walked. She was short and ridiculously big-chested, looking like she was going to topple over.

“Jesus Christ,” she hissed, pressing in close to us. “I can’t fucking believe this.”

I pushed my finger into her chest. “You’re standing here, so you already made your decision, so forget the theatrics.” I pulled my hand back and dialed it down a little. “All you have to do is escort us down

to the holding cells. Then you go back to your desk and forget all about it.”

She studied me. “And the whole debt, it’s forgiven, right? Because this bullshit could get me—”

I nodded and waved a hand. “Forgiven. The whole thing.”

Rachel shook her head. “You can’t say that.”

I looked at her and grit my teeth. “Rache—”

She leaned in to my ear. “You *cannot* tell her that.”

I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. I ran numbers through my head. I’d never kept any written records—writing things down tended to swing around and bite you in the ass. When I opened my eyes, Officer Beering looked about ready to attack me.

“You’ll be seven weeks on the 23rd,” I said. “She’s right, I’m not associated with Frank McKenna any more. I can’t forgive the debt.” I sighed, holding up a hand. I looked at Rachel and stared at her as I spoke. “So what’s in it for you is cash, exactly what you owe plus all the outstanding juice on it. You get it tomorrow morning, and if you deliver it to Frank by the 23rd you’ll be free and clear.”

Rachel nodded, once. It was the most expensive nod I’d ever seen.

Beering looked at Rachel and then nodded. “Okay. How do I get it?”

“Delivered,” I said. “To your address. Eight o’clock. It’ll be cash. It’ll be exact. Don’t skim any, and don’t be late paying, or you’ll nail yourself another week of interest.”

She didn’t trust it, I could see, but it was too good a deal to just pass up, and she struggled for thirty seconds, biting her lip and muttering to herself a little in her throat. Finally, she nodded. “All right,” she said, suddenly decisive. “Follow me. Don’t stop. Don’t talk to anybody. I do the talking, I do the door opening. The minute you

step off the elevator, I'm back up and I don't hear from you any more."

I nodded. "That's the plan."

The Tombs was always filled with undercover cops, dropping off arrests, following up on investigations, hanging around for a free cup of coffee or visiting old associates. She took us around back where the buses and vans and cruisers pulled up to unload the penny-ante crooks, drunk tourists, and unlucky idiots from the various precincts. It was like a loading dock, a tall metal garage door, a slab of concrete, three fat cops in uniform drinking coffees and smoking cigarettes, eyeing us up and down as we approached and then dismissing us like they'd seen every kind of asshole in the world and weren't impressed.

I was nervous. Cops fucking everywhere, and I realized I didn't know any of the codes or the secret handshakes. I might say or do something to raise suspicions at any moment, so I elected to keep my mouth shut, my face blank.

We passed through a checkpoint where we were expected to disgorge our weapons into a bin for retrieval upon our exit; I made a dumb show of placing something in the box and the two cops working the gate didn't even glance at me, and buzzed us through without another glance. It suddenly occurred to me to worry about meeting some cop who knew me by sight, and I started watching my feet as we walked, keeping my face down, then realized I'd never know how to get out again once Beering dumped us off and forced myself to look up with the blank expression on my face.

She led us down a dizzying sequence of concrete halls, through steel gates with flaking glossy paint rubbed down by thousands of sweating hands, down narrow, winding stairs and up narrow, winding stairs. The place was a fucking maze and smelled uniformly

like piss and fried chicken. I'd spent a few nights in the Tombs over the years sleeping on narrow wooden benches or disturbingly damp stone floors, being woken up six times to change cells and arraigned at four in the morning just to have the charges dismissed immediately, but I had no interior map of the place in my head. Finally we started descending down some fire stairs, the shaft hot and stuffy, all the heat of Manhattan pumped into it, and pushed open a dirty yellow steel door, holding it open.

"In here. He was in cell three last I checked, but he might have been moved. We gotta keep shuffling people as more come in, trying to keep the incompatibles apart. We good?"

She started to turn away but I grabbed her arm, squeezing just a little too tightly, an expert calibration. "How many cops?"

She blinked, wincing a little. "Four. Two at the desk, two on the block."

I let her go. I thought about asking her which one was fucking cell three, but let it slide, and she was gone, almost running back up the stairs, leaving us to bluff our way through the four guards on our own. I looked at Rachel, she nodded crisply at me, and we stepped into a narrow, dim corridor. I felt like the whole building was leaning in on me, the walls shifting in a few centimeters with each step, subtle and suffocating. At the desk, a young, good-looking cop in a neat, crisp uniform sat leaned back in his ancient green mental swivel chair, the cushioning all long gone, his hands laced behind his head as he chatted up his partner, a middle-aged woman who still looked good in her trousers and buttoned-down shirt. Rachel stepped forward and flashed the ID Anto had sold us. I didn't bring mine out, and kept my head turned away from them. I wanted to seem uninterested, bored, and unconcerned with protocol.

“We need to talk to someone in cell 3,” she said. I studied the female cop's shoes. They looked comfortable, and my toes ached suddenly in my own pinching pair.

“Well, hello, darlin’,” the kid said, and I heard his chair squeak as he sat forward. I glanced up under my brow; he was leaning forward with her ID pinched between his thumb and forefinger, pulling it closer so he could copy her fictitious badge number into his log book. She hadn't let go, and they were linked by the little booklet. “You're too pretty to be a detective from fucking *Inwood*,” he said, smiling down at his desk.

I looked down at my hands and worked a nonexistent hangnail. Rachel had heard something along those lines every night I'd driven her around town, and it had always seemed vaguely threatening. Somehow this kid with a badge and a gun made it sound ridiculous.

“Born Staten Island,” she said, striking just the right tone: Not interested, but not nasty, either. Nothing to get his blood up, nothing to make him think he should come back there with us. “I think I finally got the accent chiseled off.”

He laughed and let go of her badge, glanced at me, and then nodded. “Go on back. Officer Hunt will escort you back and remove the prisoner to an interview room. Give a shout if you need anything.”

We followed the trim Officer Hunt down another narrow, grim corridor, the smell of piss and sweat baked into the walls, trapped under layers of glossy gray paint. We passed the first two holding cells—the first filled with tired, unhappy-looking women of various ages and circumstances who watched us silently from their spots on the narrow wooden benches, the second filled with what looked like a single group of Hispanic men in nice casual clothes, looking like

they'd been out to the clubs and gotten into a scrape. Cell 3 was packed with an assortment of assholes—you had your crackheads, scratching themselves and muttering, your run-of-the-mill mopes trying to get some sleep, your angry, drunk tourists in their Midwest-nice outfits looking dazed and horrified. And then The Bumble, watching us with clear, steady eyes as we approached. His face never wavered from the blank, sleepy expression I was used to, but he stood up slow and casual and edged towards the front of the cell as we came near. All the benches were filled with sleeping forms, and the floor was covered in bodies, people just laying down in the slimy dirt and passing out.

“That's him,” Rachel said, pointing. “We just need five minutes.”

Officer Hunt didn't say anything. She made a racket waking everyone up and ordering them away from the entrance to the cell, one hand on her taser as they sleepily complied, red eyes turned on us for one incurious moment before they shifted to another spot on the floor. The Bumble stood a few feet back as ordered, hands down at his side, and seemed to be impersonating a shrubbery. Officer hunt was formidable, and spun Billy around, slapping cuffs on him with a jerk of her wrists, and leading him back out into the hall.

She opened up a tiny interview room, just eight square feet with a small desk and two chairs, a camera mounted in the corner, and pushed Billy in and around to the back of the desk, where he obligingly dropped into the hardbacked metal chair and let her recuff him directly to it. She breezed for the door, all efficiency in her snug trousers, and paused with one hand on the knob.

“Just leave 'im here when you're done,” she said. “We'll collect him.”

The fucking lazy cops. You could move a circus through the place

one monkey at a time and no one would look up from their newspapers to notice.

As the door shut, The Bumble jerked his arms and rolled his shoulders and tossed the cuffs onto the desk. "Fucking bitch doesn't know how to do it," he said, grinning. "The assholes on the street, *they* knew. Almost lost my hands shit was so tight. I still got pins and needles."

I smiled. "We got to move, Billy," I said, peeling off my coat. "Strip."

He blinked, shrugged, and started pulling off his shoes. The Bumble thought questions were a burden. I emptied my pockets onto the desk, placing the fake badge on top, and stripped down to my boxers, tossing The Bumble my stupid Detective costume.

"You're walking out of here with Rache," I said, threading one leg into Billy's pants. They were warm and kind of damp, facts I studiously ignored.

He nodded, pulling on my shirt. "And you?"

I shrugged, buttoning up. "He can't kill me."

The Bumble picked up the ID and examined it. "We don't look anything alike."

I sat down behind the desk and picked up the cuffs, slipping them on and cuffing myself to the chair. "If anyone actually looks at it," I said, settling myself and wiggling my toes in Billy's dirty socks, "I'll eat it. Now go."

They looked at each other and then at me. Billy looked a little rumpled and wrong for the clothes, but when he slipped on the shades I thought he looked like every other douchebag undercover in the building, and no one was ever going to notice the difference. I looked at Rachel and our eyes met.

“Don't worry,” I said. “He can't kill me, and it's not like he's going to beam me out of this room into an alternate universe. I might catch a charge, but I'll be out of here in a day, tops.”

She looked away and then turned and opened the door. The Bumble waved at me with a grin, and followed her out into the hall.

I took a deep breath. The room smelled like coffee. I settled in to wait.